

6-1975

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Recommended Citation

(1975) "Kentucky's South Carolina: The Jackson Purchase In The Secession Crisis of 1860-1861," *Jackson Purchase Historical Society*. Vol. 3 : No. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/jphs/vol3/iss1/4>

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Kentucky's South Carolina: The Jackson Purchase In The Secession Crisis of 1860 - 1861

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In 1860-1861, eleven of the fifteen slave states seceded from the Union. After forty years of agonizing sectional controversy between the North and South over slavery and the issue of states' rights, it appeared that the great American experiment in democracy had failed. The seceded states formed the Confederate States of America and were determined to be independent; the Lincoln administration equally was determined that secession was illegal and that the Union was indivisible. It seemed as though only civil war could decide the issue.

On April 12, 1861, Confederate batteries opened fire on Fort Sumter in the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina, and the American Civil War began. This greatest of all American tragedies continued for four years, leaving 618,000 men dead, 1,000,000 wounded and the South virtually destroyed. Yet the war ended slavery and made the nation whole.

One of the most tragic aspects of the Civil War was the division in sentiment in the border regions where states, counties, towns and even families often were divided. This study concerns Kentucky, one of the border states, in the critical period from the presidential election of 1860 through September 1861. More specifically, it concentrates on that part of the state known as the Jackson Purchase region.

Despite Kentucky's decision to remain loyal, the Jackson Purchase, encompassing the state's seven westernmost counties, was intensely Southern in sympathy.¹ In fact, it was the only part of Kentucky where the vast majority of the people favored secession.

The position taken by the Jackson Purchase was similar to that taken by western Virginia and eastern Tennessee; all three regions were set against their respective states. However, while the highlands of eastern Tennessee and western Virginia were Unionist regions in Confederate states, the Jackson Purchase was a secessionist region in a loyal state. Because of its strong Southern sentiment, the region was known as the "South Carolina of Kentucky."²

The Jackson Purchase was named for Andrew Jackson who played the major role in negotiating its purchase from the Chickasaw Indians in 1818. The region included the Chickasaw lands between the Tennessee and Mississippi Rivers, north to the Ohio River and south to the southern boundary of Tennessee. In 1820, it was divided between Kentucky and Tennessee along the parallel 36° 30'. Kentucky received the part of the region north of the line; south of the line was Tennessee land.³

From the outset, the Jackson Purchase was a distinct region, quite different from the rest of Kentucky. Primarily, this was due to two important factors. First, there was the geographical position of the region in relation to the remainder of the state. It was a natural land extension of western Tennessee, isolated from upper Kentucky by the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers. In addition, the Purchase was over 275 miles from the state capitol at Frankfort and Louisville, Kentucky's leading commercial city, was about 250 miles up the Ohio River.

Secondly, the nature of its early settlement helped make the Jackson Purchase a unique region. Approximately seventy per cent of its first settlers came from Tennessee, the Carolinas, Virginia and Georgia.⁴ These Southern pioneers developed a strong regional consciousness which they passed on to their children. But more importantly, they brought to Kentucky strong Jeffersonian political views. In Kentucky's formative years, Jefferson had been the idol of the state; nearly every Kentuckian had championed his party. But by the time the Jackson Purchase first was settled, the popularity of the Jefferson party in the state was waning; Kentucky had begun to turn toward the more conservative, nationalistic politics of Henry Clay.

Indeed, from about 1834 to 1854, a strong Whig party led by Clay dominated Kentucky politics. To be sure, by 1860, the Whigs were gone and the Democrats were in the majority. But it was the spirit of the old Whig party, placing the Federal Union above all other considerations, that guided Kentucky through the secession crisis.

On the other hand, from its early settlement to 1860, the Jackson Purchase was the stronghold of the Democratic party in Kentucky.⁵ In fact, it was known as the "Democratic Gibraltar" of the state.

Therefore, on the eve of the critical presidential election of 1860, the political heritage of the Jackson Purchase was Democratic and, hence, strongly in favor of "states' rights." Conversely, the political heritage of the rest of the state was, for the most part, Whig and Unionist.

From the outset, it was apparent that the 1860 presidential contest in Kentucky was between Constitutional Unionist John Bell of Tennessee and Southern Democrat John B. Breckinridge, a native Kentuckian. Despite the fact that Breckinridge was popular in his home state, Bell emerged victorious with 65,710 votes. Breckinridge polled 53,143 votes while Northern Democrat Stephen A. Douglas received 25,341 votes. Although Republican Abraham Lincoln won the election, he received only 1,364 votes in Kentucky.⁶

Across the state, Bell ran strong in traditionally Whig counties and Breckinridge fared well in traditionally Democratic counties. The rock-ribbed Whig Pennyroyal (Pennyrile) region of western and south-central Kentucky returned a large majority for Bell as did the area around Louisville. Both he and Breckinridge found support in the Bluegrass region in the north-central part of the state.⁷

Breckinridge received most of his vote in predominantly Democratic far western Kentucky and in the eastern mountains. Also, usually Democratic northern Kentucky gave him a substantial number of votes.⁸

Douglas carried six counties in central Kentucky and Campbell county across the Ohio River from Cincinnati. Almost half of Lincoln's meager vote was concentrated in Campbell and neighboring Kenton county where there were large pro-Union and anti-slavery German populations. A large portion of his vote also came from Louisville and Jefferson county and from among some of the mountain counties.⁹

In the Jackson Purchase, Breckinridge polled 4,557 votes to 2,885 for Bell, 1,089 for Douglas and 10 for Lincoln.¹⁰ Traditional voter patterns held true in the region with the exception of Ballard county, which Bell carried. McCracken county, which unlike the other Purchase counties usually voted Whig, went for Bell with Douglas second and Breckinridge third. Calloway, Fulton, Graves, Hickman and Marshall counties voted for Breckinridge by more than two to one. Surprisingly, Lincoln received eight votes in McCracken county, one vote in Ballard county and one vote in Hickman county. There were several German immigrants in these counties and more than likely, the Lincoln votes came from among them.¹¹

Moreover, the vote of Kentucky in the presidential election of 1860 was a popular mandate for the Union as Bell and Douglas, the candidates Kentuckians considered most likely to preserve the Union, received over sixty-three per cent of the vote.¹² In addition, much of the Breckinridge vote hardly could be construed as pro-Southern. This was especially true with regard to the eastern mountains because here, after Fort Sumter, the people came out strongly against secession.

Breckinridge won fifty-three per cent of the vote in the Jackson Purchase. This must be interpreted as an endorsement of Southern principles because in the region the Breckinridge Democrats became the nucleus of the secession movement. In the Purchase, unlike other parts of Kentucky, there was no rallying of Breckinridge men to the Union cause. On the contrary, after Fort Sumter, nearly all of the Bell and Douglas men in the region joined the Breckinridge Democrats in calling for secession.

Most Kentuckians continued to hope that the Union might still be preserved after Lincoln's election. Throughout November and December, Union meetings, usually without party distinction, were held across the state.¹³

In early December, Governor Beriah Magoffin submitted a plan to the other Southern governors dividing slave and free territory roughly along the old Missouri compromise line and protecting slavery in the fifteen slave states.¹⁴ Soon afterwards, Kentucky Senator John J. Crittenden offered resolutions in the Congress that were similar to Magoffin's plan. However, nothing came of either attempt at conciliation; the time for compromise seemed past.

Although South Carolina seceded on December 20 and the deep south seemed certain to follow, Kentucky was determined to remain loyal. In early January, the Kentucky partisans of Bell and Douglas met in separate conventions in Louisville but passed joint resolutions in favor

of the Union and in support of the Crittenden resolutions. Throughout January and February, meetings in support of these conventions were held in nearly every part of the state, including the Jackson Purchase.¹⁵

But despite the fact that there were some Unionists in the Purchase in early 1861, the great majority of its citizens favored secession. In January and February, there were several secession meetings in the region; at the same time, Purchase senators and representatives in the special session of the state legislature called by Governor Magoffin voted for secession.¹⁶

However, the legislature, dominated by Unionists, refused to call for secession and instead, in a spirit of conciliation, voted to send delegates to a peace conference in Washington. Later, it called for a convention of the border slave states to meet in Frankfort in May. In Kentucky, an election for delegates to the convention was scheduled for May 4.

However, Fort Sumter came on April 12 and suddenly there was war. Arkansas, Virginia, Tennessee and North Carolina joined the Confederacy, but Kentucky stood firm.

After Fort Sumter, Kentucky secessionists believed the border slave state convention was futile. Consequently, shortly before the election, the secession candidates withdrew and in the voting on May 4, the Union candidates, favoring neutrality within the Union and the Crittenden resolutions, were elected unopposed to all the delegate positions.

This election clearly showed the great difference between the Jackson Purchase and the rest of Kentucky on the Union question. Aside from the Purchase, the total vote cast statewide in this all Union election was over seventy-six per cent of the vote in the presidential election. And the Union vote (although the secessionists withdrew there was a scattering of secession votes across the state) was 15,000 more than the total vote polled by Bell and Douglas.¹⁷

But in the Jackson Purchase, only 903 out of 8,531 voters who participated in the presidential election of 1860 voted in the border slave state convention election. Here, more people stayed away from the polls than in any other part of Kentucky.¹⁸

The border slave state convention proved that Fort Sumter, bringing on war between the North and the South, had a different effect on the Jackson Purchase than on the remainder of Kentucky. Statewide, the large voter turnout in the election, which had only Union candidates, indicated that Fort Sumter did not turn the people toward disunion. On the other hand, the cool reception the Purchase afforded the election showed that Fort Sumter had swept away virtually all of the Unionist minority in the region and united the people for secession.

In mid-May, the Kentucky legislature resolved in favor of neutrality, a course of action warmly received in most parts of the state,¹⁹ but not in the Jackson Purchase. Therefore, on May 29-31, a convention met in Mayfield to consider separating from Kentucky and uniting with western Tennessee to form a pro-Confederate state. However, because Tennes-

see was about to secede, the western counties were unresponsive and the movement failed.²⁰

June 20 brought to Kentucky an election for representatives to Lincoln's special session of Congress. Some Kentucky secessionists called on the people to ignore the election; others saw it as an excellent opportunity to bring the secession cause before the people.²¹ But at any rate, the secession party fielded candidates in each of the state's ten congressional districts.

The congressional election was, in effect, a referendum on the issue of Union or secession. A large secessionist majority probably would have caused Governor Magoffin to order the adjourned legislature back into session and it is likely that a secession convention would have followed.

However, Union candidates won in every district except the first; statewide they polled seventy-two per cent of the vote and carried ninety-four of Kentucky's 110 counties. The total Union vote was 700 more than the vote polled by Bell and Douglas for president.²²

The first district, which included the Jackson Purchase, went for secessionist Henry C. Burnett of Trigg county. However, Burnett's margin of victory was fairly close; he polled 8,998 votes to 6,225 for his Unionist opponent, Lawrence Trimble of Paducah.²³

But Burnett's total came primarily from the Jackson Purchase. Outside of the region, he carried only his home county and it by a scant twenty votes. The Purchase gave him 5,626 votes to only 1,785 for Trimble.²⁴

With regard to the Jackson Purchase, it is instructive to contrast this election with the presidential election held eight months earlier. In the presidential election, Southern Democrat Breckinridge polled 4,557 votes and carried five of the seven counties in the region. But the secessionist Burnett amassed 5,626 votes and won every Purchase county.²⁵

Further, Fulton county added a referendum for the "North," the "South" or for "Neutrality" to the ballot. The result was 645 votes for the "South," none for the "North" and three for "neutrality."²⁶

Thus, in late June 1861, the Jackson Purchase stood squarely for secession while almost every other part of Kentucky favored the Union. In effect, the Purchase was an isolated pro-Confederate enclave in a loyal state.

In the Jackson Purchase, the increase in the Southern (Breckinridge) vote from the presidential election of 1860 through the border slave state convention and congressional elections, clearly indicated the political solidarity which had developed in the region. After Fort Sumter, the former Whig and conservative Democratic minority (Bell and Douglas men) closed ranks with the majority pro-secession Breckinridge Democrats.

On the other hand, in the rest of Kentucky, the situation was entirely different. In January, the state organizations of Bell and Douglas joined hands to form the basis of the Union party. Further, as evidenced by the border slave state convention election and the congressional election, many Breckinridge Democrats in other parts of Kentucky had become Unionists or had been Unionists all along.

In July, although the Federal army was defeated at Bull Run, Virginia, in the first significant battle of the war, Kentucky's Unionism did not waver. This was apparent in the August 6 election for a new state legislature which was, perhaps, the Unionists' greatest triumph in the secession crisis.

The secessionists viewed the state legislature election as a last chance for a Confederate Kentucky. They hoped to win a majority of seats and thereby be able to pass legislation calling for a secession convention. In the previous session of the legislature, the Unionists, who were in the majority, successfully blocked all attempts by the secessionists to call such a convention.

But on August 5, the hopes of the secessionists were dashed; Kentuckians voted seventy-five Unionists but only twenty-five secessionists to the house of representatives and sent twenty-four Unionists and three secessionists to the senate (in the senate, including holdovers, the Unionists held the majority twenty-seven to eleven). All told, Union candidates won in seventy-seven counties, secessionists carried thirty counties and the vote of three counties was divided.²⁷

Although this election indicated that Unionism still prevailed in Kentucky, it also showed that the Jackson Purchase, more than ever, favored secession. In Ballard, Calloway, Fulton, Graves, Hickman and McCracken counties, secessionists ran unopposed; in Marshall county, a secessionist polled 698 votes to 110 votes for a Unionist.²⁸ Again, as in the two previous elections, the Jackson Purchase returned the largest percentage of secession votes of any region in Kentucky.²⁹

Kentucky's loyalty was tested in early September as a Confederate army occupied Hickman and Columbus and a Federal army occupied Paducah. Jackson Purchase citizens were pleased at the arrival of the Confederates in the region, but, at the same time, they were dismayed with the Federal presence at Paducah.³⁰

However, the Unionist state legislature demanded that the Confederates withdraw and asked the Federal government for military aid. This action ended neutrality and proved the state was loyal.

Thus, in the secession crisis of 1860-1861, the Jackson Purchase region was overwhelmingly secessionist while the rest of Kentucky, for the most part, favored the Union. Throughout this critical period, the Purchase was the only region in the state where nearly all of the people were for joining the Confederacy. Indeed, the Jackson Purchase was the "South Carolina of Kentucky."³¹

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1. The Jackson Purchase now contains eight counties as, in 1886, Carlisle county was formed out of the southern portion of Ballard county.
 2. J. H. Battle, G. C. Kniffen and W. H. Perrin, **Kentucky: A History of the State** (Louisville: F. A. Battey and Co., 1885), p. 7.
 3. This paper concerns only the Kentucky part of the Jackson Purchase.
 4. Seventh Census of the United States, Population, Ballard, Calloway, Fulton, Graves, Hickman, Marshall and McCracken counties, Kentucky. National Archives Microfilm Publication, National Archives, Washington, D. C., Reels Number 190, 194, 200, 201,

- 205, 211 and 212. Until 1850, the census did not record place of birth of the population. Therefore, this percentage is an abstraction of the 1850 census for the seven Jackson Purchase counties. It was arrived at by noting the place of birth of Purchase citizens sixty years of age or older as listed in the census. One must assume that they were, for the most part, early settlers of the region.
5. In presidential elections from 1824 to 1856, the Democratic vote in the Jackson Purchase was more than two-thirds of the total vote cast. See J. B. Shannon and Ruth McQuown, **Presidential Politics in Kentucky** (Lexington: Bureau of Government Research, College of Arts and Sciences, University of Kentucky, 1950), pp. 2-31.
 6. **Louisville Daily Courier**, November 26, 1860, hereafter cited as **The Courier**.
 7. **Ibid.**, Edward Conrad Smith, **The Borderland in the Civil War** (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1927), pp. 64-65.
 8. **Ibid.**
 9. **Ibid.**
 10. **The Courier**, November 26, 1860.
 11. **Ibid.**, Seventh Census, National Archives Microfilm Publication, Reels 190, 205, 212.
 12. **The Courier**, November 26, 1860; Shannon and McQuown, **Presidential Politics**, pp. 35-36.
 13. Lewis and Richard Collins, **History of Kentucky** (Covington: Collins and Co., 1886), Vol. 1, p. 84.
 14. **Journal of the House of Representatives of Kentucky, Session of January 17, 1861** (Frankfort: John B. Major, State Printer, 1861), p. 19, hereafter cited as **House Journal, Session of January 17, 1861**.
 15. See **The Louisville Daily Journal**, January-February, 1861, hereafter cited as **The Journal**. The Jackson Purchase Union meetings were held in Calloway, Graves and Marshall counties. For details of these meetings see **The Journal**, January 28, 29 and February 8, 1861. See also two letters, R. K. Williams to John J. Crittenden, January 21, 1861, and John Eaker to L. W. Powell, January 23, 1861, in John J. Crittenden Papers, National Archives, Washington, D. C.
 16. The Jackson Purchase secession meetings were held in Ballard, Calloway, Hickman and Marshall counties. See **The Courier**, February 6 and 11, 1861 and **The Journal**, February 20, 1861. For the voting record of the region's three senators and five representatives see **Journal of the Senate of Kentucky, Session of January 17, 1861** (Frankfort: John B. Major, State Printer, 1861) and **House Journal, Session of January 17, 1861**.
 17. **The Courier**, November 26, 1860; **The Journal**, June 18, 1861.
 18. **Ibid.**
 19. E. Merton Coulter, **The Civil War and Readjustment in Kentucky** (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1927), p. 41.
 20. See Berry F. Craig, "The Jackson Purchase Region of Kentucky in the Secession Crisis of 1860-1861," unpublished master's thesis in Murray State University Library, Murray, Ky., pp. 45-56.
 21. Coulter, **Civil War and Readjustment**, p. 95; Ed Porter Thompson, **History of the Orphan Brigade** (Louisville: S. N. Thompson, 1898), p. 389. Thompson wrote that Joseph H. Lewis, the secessionist candidate in the third district, ran for congress "not with the hope of election, or of accomplishing anything by legislation, even should he be chosen; but with the determination to arouse the citizens, if possible, to a sense of their duty, and to incite opposition to the designs of the Washington cabal."
 22. **The Courier**, November 26, 1860; **The Journal**, August 9, 1861.
 23. **The Journal**, August 9, 1861.
 24. **Ibid.**
 25. **Ibid.**, **The Courier**, November 26, 1860.
 26. **The Courier**, June 24, 1860.
 27. **Ibid.**, August 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 16, 17, 1861; **The Journal**, August 15, September 7, 1861.
 28. **Ibid.**, August 10, 1861.
 29. **The Journal**, June 18, August 9, 15, 1861; **The Courier**, August 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 16, 17, 1861.
 30. See Craig, "Jackson Purchase," pp. 91-103.
 31. Battle, Perrin and Kniffen, **Kentucky**, p. 7.